BCG Vaccine

If you had BCG vaccine and are now being tested for TB (tuberculosis), here are some important things to know:

What is BCG?
BCG (Bacille Calmette-Guerin) is a vaccine made up of a live, weakened strain of the tuberculosis bacteria. It is used in many countries, outside of the United States. It was developed and put in use in 1921. Many different strains of this vaccine exist today.

Why was I given BCG?
BCG is usually given to very young children (usually shortly after birth) in countries that have very high rates of tuberculosis disease. It may prevent the most serious forms of tuberculosis disease from developing in children. Adults may have received a booster dose prior to immigration.

How does BCG work?
BCG does not prevent someone from getting latent tuberculosis infection or contagious tuberculosis disease. BCG has only been proven to prevent young children from developing tuberculosis of the brain and other very serious forms of this disease.

How long does BCG vaccine last?
BCG protection goes away with time. It is usually not effective in preventing disease after five years. Therefore, if you had your BCG vaccine more than five years ago, it is probably no longer effective.

Could my BCG cause me to have a positive TB skin test?
BCG given several years ago should not make your TB skin test positive. It is OK to get a TB skin test if you have had a BCG vaccination. It is important to let your doctor or nurse know when you had your BCG and if you have had more than one dose. Any BCG-vaccinated person who has a TB skin test reaction may receive a diagnosis of TB infection and should consider treatment. This is especially true if you were born or lived in a country that has a large number of contagious TB disease cases or are a recent contact of someone who has contagious TB disease.

Could my BCG cause me to have a positive T-Spot or Quantiferon (blood assay) test?
No, blood assay tests such as T-Spot or Quantiferon TB Gold (QFT-G) are not influenced by previous BCG vaccine. A positive blood test most likely means that you have latent TB infection or TB disease, and you need further medical evaluation.

To find out more about tuberculosis, call your local health department:

Public Health Madison & Dane County
Phone: (608) 266-4821

References on the above information can be found:
Core Curriculum on TB-4th ed. 2000
New York State Health Dept. TB Control Division